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ABSTRACT

Although divorce is pervasive on the societal level, it can be an exceedingly difficult time of adjustment on an individual level. One therapeutic method for facilitating "growth" in divorce is a group experience entitled "Divorce Adjustment Groups." The goals of this group are to: (1) help individuals regain emotional autonomy; (2) mitigate the debilitating aspects of divorce; (3) have a place to safely discharge some of the emotionality of divorce; (4) develop a broader concept of divorce; (5) meet new friends in a meaningful way; and (6) learn coping mechanisms that transfer into dealing with other losses. This paper also discusses the need for, the unique dimensions of, and the process of conducting the group. (RWP)

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"DIVORCE ADJUSTMENT GROUPS"

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DIVORCE ADJUSTMENT GROUPS

Although divorce is pervasive on the societal level, it can be an exceedingly difficult time of adjustment on an individual level. One therapeutic method I have found for facilitating "growth" in divorce is a group experience entitled "Divorce Adjustment Groups." This article presents a model for conducting these groups; including the need, the goals, the unique dimensions and the process of conducting the group.

Divorce Adjustment Groups

Last year over 913,000 persons in the United States legally dissolved their marriages. With the children, family and close friends included, it would be safe to say that millions of persons each year are affected by divorce. Despite these ballooning statistics, divorce as a process has been barely touched. Communication training, affiliation skills, marital counseling, assertive training and anxiety reduction are part if the counselor's repertoire of skills. Yet little concentrated effort has been spent on the uncoupling process. Are there some ways to mitigate the pain and ease the transition? What therapeutic understandings and/or tools facilitate regaining emotional autonomy?

Four years ago I began asking these questions. I started by exploring the research literature for what had been done (very little) and began experimenting on my own with different models of divorce counseling. After working extensively with Divorce Adjustment groups, I have evolved a model which has been effective in working with a divorcing population. The components of the model are the needs, the goals, the selection procedure, the unique dimensions and the format of a divorce adjustment group.

Need for Divorce Adjustment Groups

Divorce can be trying for the healthiest of individuals. In a society which is set up to integrate couples, the divorced person often feels like the odd person out. The new found single not only lacks in the physical sense of belongingness to a family group, but also lacks in the more intangible sense of identifying with an approved societal group. One only needs to consider the emotional difference in the reaction to these two sentences: "I'm married to John." and "I'm divorced." The first sentence likely elicits a reaction of

"She is safely tucked away in a family unit." The reaction to the second statement might indeed be "He/She is a loose end. We will have to introduce him/her to someone else quickly so he/she will be headed back into the state of matrimony." The divorce period is a societal limbo. One of the strongest needs for conducting a divorce adjustment group is to develop a sense of belonging and identity for this critical transition time. With this need met, the individual can more quickly move into letting go of the past and developing a greater sense of autonomy and self esteem.

Letting go of the past involves considerable emotional drainage. This is a second need for the group. Friends and family can be extremely helpful in a divorce, but an individual runs the risk of overusing friends in a unilateral taking of support during a time when support is sorely needed. Likewise, friends are often frustrated because they do not know how best to help the individual go through the process. Having a place to drain off the anger, frustrations, grief, relief, joy and sorrows of divorce is vitally important in preventing friend abuse.

Sharing and contrast comprise the third need for the divorce group. A group rather than an individual counseling is needed here. The individual not only feels a common bondage with the other group member who has shared a similar experience or feeling, but also learns something from the contrast. One client, for instance, who was cut off by his second wife without much forewarning because "she wanted more freedom" was left to fill in his own imagination as to how he contributed to being abandoned. By listening to others in the group who had had the experience of leaving their spouses because "they needed more freedom" he was able to grasp what had happened in his own relationship. Many persons have very little idea how or why they ended up in a divorce but are aware of a general level of accumulated frustration. Lessening the ambiguities of divorce relieves some of the tension.

Lastly, the specialized nature of the group communicates both an acceptance of the fact that a person is divorcing/divorced and an acknowledgement that divorce involves adjustment. In a society with a centuries old feeling that someone has to be at fault in order for a divorce to occur, an individual frequently absorbs the guilt. In a survey of divorced clients who had made use of the services of the Georgia State University Counseling Center, over 98 per cent of the 80 respondents reported "a feeling of failure in being able to sustain a marriage." A Divorce Adjustment group allows open and honest dealing with the divorce process without fear of further being judged for making that decision.

Zeroing In:

The specific goals of a Divorce Adjustment group are as follows:

1. To help individuals regain emotional autonomy. Emotional autonomy is evidenced by the individual's concentration on self rather than dependence on memories from the former marriage or dependence on someone else to find fulfillment and satisfaction.

2. To mitigate the debilitating aspects of divorce. Examples of the debilitating aspects of divorce are (a) paralysis and/or withdrawal which precludes making new friends, functioning well on the job and learning from the divorce, (b) reverting back to the ex-spouse for support when that person does not want to give the support, (c) overreacting with family and friends because of the emotional turmoil, (d) feeling like the meaning is gone out of life, etc.

3. To have a place to safely discharge some of the emotionality of divorce. Excess anger, frustration, relief, confusion, loneliness, grief, etc., all illustrate some of the emotions which need to be ventilated without fear of having them boomerang in the future.

4. To develop a broader concept of divorce. Developing a broader concept means learning some alternative ways to looking at marriage and divorce, some common stages that divorcing persons go through, how other cultures handle divorcing persons, some of the societal roots of the feelings of failure. The purpose here is to put some cognitive structure on the divorce process.

5. To meet new friends in a meangingful way. The divorce adjustment groups offer a place where disclosing real feelings and aspects about self are encouraged. In this way the group promotes genuine exchange rather than the game playing protocol that is often reinforced by singles organizations or bars.

6. To learn coping mechanisms that transfer into dealing with other losses. These coping mechanisms include how to use rather than abuse depression, anger, and anxiety. For example, the group teaches tricks of climbing out of a deep depression, Jacobson's method of progressive relaxation and George Bach's rules of fair fighting. Hopefully, these methods of using, but being able to control, emotions will become an integral part of the individual's future coping mechanisms.

Unique Dimensions of a Divorce Adjustment Group

Since the Divorce Adjustment groups appeal to a homogenous population, at least in one dimension, that may present some unique dimmensions. Being aware that these are likely, and planning for them, are necessary to work with and through them.

The first consideration is that everyone in the group will be at a different stage of divorce. One individual may be at the very first stages where an emotional cloud burst distorts and envelops the individual. This person may need a greater deal of attention than the person who is further down the road of adjustment. The later person may just be looking for meaningful friendships rather than purging the heavy emotionality from which he/she has

already graduated. It is important for the group to understand that these varying stages are a necessary component for the dynamics of the group. A common question asked of me at the beginning of each group is "I have been divorced for a year and a half. I feel pretty comfortable with where I am but haven't worked out everything and would like to use this group for that purpose. Do I fit in?" Another individual states "My wife just left last week. I am in such a turmoil I can't see straigt. Am I appropriate for the Divorce Adjustment Group?" The question generally reflects, I have found, a concern about being a possible outsider in the group. Having varying stages of divorce represented in the group presents a problem only if the individuals expect that the entire group will all have the same needs.

Another common occurance is to have a group who wants "instant intimacy." Rather than facing aloneness and developing a strong sense of self, some individuals want to run immediately into another intense relationship. The group may be perceived as a vehicle to have that need met. Because the person feels particularly hungry, the first two sessions may feel like he/she is only getting the appetizer. I have found it helpful to warn individuals that they will need to be patient with the group and stick with it during its entire duration to have some of that hunger filled. The first session, I warn them, is not likely to produce instant relief to any felt area of marked deprivation. By the third session the group usually develops a sense of cohesiveness and depth as individuals let their defenses down. The important point though, is not to expect relief within the first hour.

Closely associated with this expectation of immediate intimacy is the guardedness exhibited by great numbers of these same divorcing persons. One frequently reported phenomenon is "I am starved for the same level of intimacy I had in my marriage, but whenever I get close to it at all, I turn and run."

This guardedness shows up in the group in various ways. The first has already been mentioned, e.g., an overconcern prior to the first meeting as to whether or not he/she will fit in. Another way happens shortly after the group commences. An individual will ask for a lot of support and then not trust it when it comes. Another outcrop is when a person starts to let go within the group and disclose some feelings and then suddenly withdraws. Increased sensitivity to rejection is a natural part of the divorce process. Understanding that this approach/avoidance phenomenon is a common dynamic of a group, and a sometimes exaggerated dynamic of a dynamic of a Divorce Adjustment group encourages patience with it.

A fourth difficulty in a Divorce Adjustment group is that the individual has little way to get a hold of the divorce experience. Just in the last few years, the subject of divorce has been released from its taboo status. Few books have been written on the emotional experience of divorce. Since divorce has not been a subject which has been openly dealt with for very long, the vocabulary is under-developed. For instance, Jan remarries a fellow who has two children and brings those children into the new marriage. No succinct label applies to those children. Jan must address them as "the children that John had in his first marriage." If Jane wants to describe the inlaws of her first marriage, she has no specific labels. Even labeling her first husband is done in the negative "ex-spouse" rather than saying a more positive "prima husband." Our vocabulary was created around the assumption that persons will only be married once. Along a similar vein, very little empirical research has been done on the emotional aspects of divorce, e.g. the impact of the divorce on the individual-or on the children. Likewise, little has been done to help the individual organize the experience or know what to expect. The most helpful books I have found for providing this resource are Creative Divorce (Krantzler, 1974) The Boys and Girls Book about Divorce (Gardner, 1970) and The American

Way of Divorce: Prescriptions for Change (Kessler, 1975).

Group Process

Selection of group members: The definition of divorce I use for my groups is not a legal one. Divorced, in this instance, applies to someone who has decided that the marriage is irrevocably ended. There is generally a point in the dissolution process that a person turns around, stops looking at the marriage as a hopeful relationship, and accepts a divorce as imminent. This decision may happen before or after physical separation. I have found it important to set two criteria for membership: (1) that the person has definitely decided on divorce (or has been cut off by a partner making that decision), and (2) that the person be physically separated from the spouse. The physical separation makes the divorce adjustment process real, instead of just anticipating what separation would be like.

The ideal number, I have found, for a group is 10 to 12 members. I have experimented with groups as large as 25, but have found that this does not give individual members as much attention as each one wants. A group of 12 provides a very adequate diversity of experience and perceptions.

Format: The duration of the group is usually at least five weeks with a two hour session once a week. At the end of five weeks the group can renegotiate additional meetings.

The format of the group is divided into two main segments, e.g., the lecturettes and the unstructured group process. At the onset of each group I give a lecturette of about 15 to 20 minutes and follow it with discussion and group process.

An outline for the lecturettes is given at the end of this article. Further details of each lecturette are described in The American Way of Divorce: Prescriptions for Change (Kessler, 1975). The purpose of these talks is to (1) provide a structure for the emotional divorce experience by plotting some

stages and expectations of the experience; (2) give persons a vocabulary to work with or some stimulus material to relate to if he/she is having a difficult time expressing or getting a hold of what is happening; (3) provide a structured experience at the beginning of each group so that each person can warm up to the process in a safe (and more passive) way; (4) teach specific therapeutic tools for changing thoughts, emotions and/or behaviors in order to make divorce a constructive rather than a destructive experience.

The unstructured group process is designed to promote maximum interpersonal exchange among the group members. Since identification with the group and a feeling of belonging to something is one of the major objectives of the group, the unstructured part seems to be particularly valuable. By direct sharing of experiences, giving each other feedback, helping with alternative behaviors to overcome some obstacle, the members are well on their way to developing those vitally needed safe, but intimate, relationships.

The unstructured, spontaneous, individually tailored group process is difficult to describe systematically. However, individual issues and dynamics which have reappeared frequently in the course of conducting Divorce Adjustment Groups may prove helpful to potential leaders.

Issues and Dynamics

Emotional Yo-Yo: One thirty-five year old Atlanta divorced fellow in the group commented, "I was so involved in my job. Now I live from minute to minute -- just holding on. It seems like I alternate between elation and depression -- just hours apart. Practically anything can spark a depression. The feeling of vulnerability leaves me susceptible to the least little criticism. The impact of that criticism can throw

me into an unrealistic downward spiral." Another female client in the group, for instance, described this phenomenon: "I can't understand why I reacted as strongly as I did. I know she didn't mean to be judgmental, but when she said that my husband was perceptive, I took that to mean that I am not. I couldn't work for the rest of the day. Her friendship means a lot to me, but I can't take that criticism." These mood swings and heightened sensitivities during divorce can be dramatic and frequent.

The emotional yo-yo (mood swing) appeared in the group in yet a second way, i.e. exaggeration of time perspective. One group member shouted, "I can't stand to face this weekend! I have absolutely nothing planned. Nothing. Last Saturday night lasted for months .... and I can't face it again."

The turning point for this forlorn fellow was in realizing that yes, he did have empty blocks of time created by the separation but life wasn't always going to mean loneliness. His exaggerated sense of time was due to the emotional turmoil he was in. Giving himself permission to be lonely, to experience panic and to express the sense of desperation was what he need to disipate it.

One bit of advice I often lend to people experiencing the heavy emotionality and discortions of divorce is to (1) try and save their overcharged expression of feeling for the group so the outburst does not harm friendships, job or family, (2) realize this is a stage, and (3) try to keep a third eye above the emotional weather system, looking down, to monitor the passing storms. An individual can almost figure out the time it takes to weather an emotional loss (3 months, 8 months, 18 months, etc.) and begin to count down. The third eye is vital to the person to realize there is an end to any suffering experienced.

During this time of roller coastering, an individual also is required to make important decisions. These decisions may vary from what kind of car to buy to what new living environment am I going to choose? Changes in vocational directions are also frequent during this period. At a time when being objective and rational is very important, the divorcing person has the most emotional interference. "It was a terrible time to be making decisions," decried one client, "I just blundered along as best I could." Making decisions within the context of the group can be helpful in adding clarity, some rational feedback and some possible alternatives.

Sand in the Gears: Divorcing individuals sometimes find themselves (often surprisingly so) behaviorally plugged up. One client remarked, "I want to get started on the goals I had set for myself before we separated. I was prepared for the divorce, I thought. But now I find myself almost paralyzed, like someone threw sand in the gears. I try to write my dissertation and my hands won't move to write. The jogging and fitness program I was on is no more. I can't even get the energy to interview for a part time job."

The blow of being cut off or abandoned frequently induces this phenomenon. "I can't believe it," exclaimed one 32-year-old group member, "She just left me in the dust. All I can do is sit around and obsess about it. I feel stunned."

Catharsis and acceptance in the group usually help mitigate the painfulness of the paralysis. Quite often the paralysis itself does not cause the psychic agony, but rather the guilt or anger about it. Getting in touch with, and rid of, these secondary feelings is the focus of the group effort at this point.

Passivity that Devours: The acute paralysis does not pose as many long term problems as the chronic more insidious type of passivity. Time favors a temporary setback. A passive approach to life frequently emerges as a major adjustment difficulty. One male group member frantically revealed "I've been waiting for her to call for three weeks. I went by her house and left a Charlie Rich record as a gift. I haven't been able to concentrate on work waiting for her to call and thank me. I can't wait forever. I've even thought of suicide." This incident typified the group member's approach both to the marriage and divorce. He counted on his wife to make him happy or to relieve him of suffering. A large part of his overreation to the record incident was because he had done little for himself in other areas to make himself happy. He had no hobbies, invested little in work and waited, in general, for people to give him rewards or compliments. A very essential part of the group process was to enable him to initiate. First; he used the group to role play initiating new contacts with girls. Secondly, he role played asserting himself and redefining his job description so as to maximize his talents! Assertion became a part of his repertoire of behaviors so that it spilled over into other self expressions and demands. He celebrated his self victory after his prima wife wanted to see him one night and he knew it would be upsetting to him so he assertively said "No." The first time he had ever said "no" to that formerly inimical request.

Burying the Hatchet: Justice frequently comes up as an issue in the divorce group. For example, one female described her sense of being used because she worked to put her husband through graduate school and he subsequently left her. "My lawyer says to skin him alive," she commented, and I'm sorely tempted. I know he was having an affair while we were together and I could pile a bunch of evidence against him in court. Yet,

I hate to start that power struggle. He could come back and crucify me by distorting some facts."

The question of "Do I or do I not enter a power struggle?" arises frequently in divorce groups. Losses felt in marriage quite often seek vindication in divorce.

If the person wanting to start the divorce warfare is in the group, it is fairly likely that the group process will abort that desire. One way this happens is by other members sharing the psychic costs (even as an initiator) of such warfare. "No amount of property gain or child support is worth what you loose by that mudslinging. I have a very bitter and black scar caused by some of the lies the lawyer accused me of in court. That whole adversary process was unnecessary. At the end of a $6000.00 lawyer's bill, we still ended up sitting down and working out the settlement ourselves."

Another way the group helps is to wedge under the rock of vindictiveness. "Why do you want to make up your loss now?" "What do you really want to gain?" "Do you feel any responsibility in your feeling of being used?" One realization that has happened a multitude of times is that the person begins to see the choice he/she had in making the original investment and also to see the risks involved.

The aforementioned woman summed it up by saying, "Yes, I can remember when I made the choice about sending him to graduate school. I remember feeling it was my choice, that I wasn't forced into it. I wanted to get the payoffs, but really I had no guarantee. I guess it was like investing in the stock market and losing."

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